

Message Text

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PAGE 01 CARACA 04055 230034Z
ACTION ARA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 EB-08 CIAE-00 INR-07 NSAE-00 /026 W
-----231142Z 086338 /21

R 222024Z APR 77
FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 7371
INFO AMEMBASSY BOGOTA
AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN
AMEMBASSY NASSAU
USCINCSO QUARRY HEIGHTS
USCINCLANT NORFOLK VA

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E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PORG, OPEC, PDIP, PINT, SOCI, PARM, GJ, BF, VE
SUBJECT: THIS WEEK IN VENEZUELA

REF: CARACAS 3789 (NOTAL)

SUMMARY: OPANAL GENERAL CONFERENCE LAUDS USG DECISION TO SIGN
PROTOCOL I OF TREATY OF TLATELOLCO. PRESIDENT PEREZ VISITS
MIDDLE EAST. VENEZUELAN ELECTED SECRETARY GENERAL OF ORIT. FOOD
SHORTAGES PLAGUE VENEZUELAN CONSUMER. CONGRESS CONCLUDES DEBATE
ON PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE. EX-PRESIDENT BETANCOURT RETURNS HOME.
VENEZUELA ESTABLISHES DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS WITH THE BAHAMAS AND
GRENADA. NIEHOUS SUSPECTS APPEAR IN COURT.

1. OPANAL GENERAL CONFERENCE LAUDS USG DECISION TO SIGN PROTOCOL
I OF TREATY OF TLATELOLCO. THE GENERAL CONFERENCE OF THE
ORGANIZATION FOR THE PROSCRIPTION OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN LATIN
AMERICA (OPANAL) WHICH ADMINISTERS THE TREATY OF TLATELOLCO'S
PROVISIONS, MET IN CARACAS APRIL 19-21. DURING THE OPENING DAY,
THE VENEZUELAN FOREIGN MINISTER, THE OPANAL SECRETARY GENERAL AND THE
CHIEF OF THE MEXICAN DELEGATION, AMONG OTHERS, EXPRESSED GREAT
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SATISFACTION, BOTH PUBLICLY AND PRIVATELY, AT PRESIDENT CARTER'S
ANNOUNCEMENT APRIL 14 THAT THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT WILL SIGN
PROTOCOL I OF THE TREATY. THE CONFERENCE ALSO PASSED A RESOLU-
TION EXPRESSING GRATITUDE FOR THE USG DECISION. US SIGNATURE
AND RATIFICATION OF PROTOCOL I ARE IMPORTANT STEPS TOWARD EVENTUALLY
BRINGING THE TREATY FULLY INTO EFFECT.

2. PRESIDENT PEREZ VISITS MIDDLE EAST. PRESIDENT PEREZ LEFT APRIL 20 FOR A TWO-WEEK VISIT TO SIX MIDDLE EASTERN COUNTRIES (QATAR, SAUDI ARABIA, KUWAIT, IRAN, IRAQ AND THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES), ALL EARLY MEMBERS OF OPEC, AND THE ORGANIZATION'S HEADQUARTERS IN VIENNA. ACCOMPANYING HIM WERE FOUR MINISTERS AND THE HEAD OF THE NATIONALIZED OIL INDUSTRY. IN DESCRIBING THE PURPOSE OF HIS TRIP, HE PLAYED DOWN POSSIBLE ATTEMPTS TO HEAL THE OPEC PRICE SPLIT AND EMPHASIZED THE IMPORTANCE OF OPEC UNITY TO ADVANCE THE NEEDS OF THE THIRD WORLD. INTERIOR MINISTER OCTAVIO LEPAGE HAS BEEN SWORN IN AS ACTING PRESIDENT IN PEREZ' ABSENCE.

3. VENEZUELAN ELECTED SECRETARY GENERAL OF ORIT. VETERAN PETROLEUM WORKER JUAN JOSE DELPINO WAS UNANIMOUSLY ELECTED SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE INTER-AMERICAN REGIONAL WORKERS ORGANIZATION (ORIT) AT ITS MEXICO CITY CONGRESS ON APRIL 17. DELPINO, WHO RECENTLY RETURNED TO THE AD PARTY'S FOLD AFTER TEN YEARS WITH BREAKAWAY MEP, IS CONSIDERED ONE OF THE MOST OUTSTANDING TRADE UNIONISTS IN VENEZUELA. THERE ARE GREAT EXPECTATIONS THAT, AS CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER, HE WILL RESTORE ORIT TO ITS FORMER VIGOR. DELPINO'S ELECTION PROSPECTS WERE GIVEN A BOOST BY A STRONG LETTER FROM PRESIDENT PEREZ TO THE ORIT CONGRESS CALLING FOR A REDEDICATION TO FREE AND DEMOCRATIC TRADE UNIONISM IN THE HEMISPHERE AND EULOGIZING THE ROLE OF THE AFL-CIO IN PROMOTING INTER-AMERICAN LABOR SOLIDARITY. (SEE CARACAS 1288 FOR A BRIEF BIO OF DELPINO.)

4. SHORTAGES PLAGUE VENEZUELAN CONSUMER. SHORTAGES OF BASIC COMMODITIES SUCH AS SUGAR, COFFEE, MEAT, CHEESE, POWDERED AND LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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WHOLE MILK, BABYFOOD, EGG, POTATOES AND RICE ARE BECOMING MORE COMMONPLACE IN CARACAS AND ELSEWHERE IN VENEZUELA. CRITICS OF THE GOVERNMENT CHARGE THAT ADMINISTRATION POLICIES HAVE ACTED AS A DISINCENTIVE TO THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR, DISCOURAGING PRODUCTION BY FIXING PRICES FOR BASIC FOOD ITEMS AT AN UNREALISTICALLY LOW LEVEL. IN A MOVE TO RELIEVE SHORTAGES, THE GOV RECENTLY DECIDED TO PERMIT THE IMPORT OF ALL FOOD ITEMS SUBJECT TO PRICE REGULATION. COMMENT: WHILE THIS WILL TEMPORARILY HELP THE CONSUMER, IT IS A SHORT TERM PALLIATIVE WHICH DOES NOT ADDRESS THE UNDERLYING CAUSES OF THE SHORTAGES, BUT INCREASES VENEZUELA'S ALREADY RAPIDLY GROWING IMPORT PAYMENTS.

5. CONGRESS CONCLUDES DEBATE ON PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE. IN A FINAL MARATHON SESSION THE CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES APRIL 20 BROUGHT TO A CLOSE THE CONGRESSIONAL DEBATE ON PRESIDENT PEREZ' ANNUAL MESSAGE DELIVERED LAST MONTH TO THE CONGRESS. DURING THE FOUR-WEEK DEBATE SPEAKERS FOR THE RULING AD PARTY REPEATEDLY ATTEMPTED TO SHOW THAT THE PERFORMANCE OF THE PEREZ ADMINISTRATION HAS BEEN SUPERIOR TO THAT OF THE PREVIOUS COPEI GOVERNMENT WHILE OPPOS-

TION COPEI DEPUTIES STOUTLY DEFENDED THE RECORD OF FORMER PRESIDENT CALDERA. THE CHAMBER FINALLY APPROVED MOTIONS TO CALL SIX CABINET MINISTERS BEFORE CONGRESSIONAL COMMITTEES TO TESTIFY REGARDING THE WORK OF THEIR MINISTRIES AND TO CONTINUE THE CHAMBER'S ANALYSIS OF THE FIFTH PLAN. THE CHAMBER IS SCHEDULED TO TAKE UP THE OFT-DEFERRED EDUCATION BILL NEXT.

6. EX-PRESIDENT BETANCOURT RETURNS HOME. THE AGING FATHER OF VENEZUELAN DEMOCRACY, EX-PRESIDENT ROMULO BETANCOURT, RETURNED APRIL 20 TO A WARM GREETING FROM HUNDREDS OF AD PARTY AND GOVERNMENT LEADERS. THE FOUNDER OF THE AD PARTY HAD BEEN FLOWN TO NEW YORK MARCH 30 FOR MEDICAL TREATMENT. SPECULATION ABOUT HIS FAILING HEALTH HAD PROVOKED RUMORS OF A POSSIBLE REALIGNMENT IN AD PARTY FORCES. HOWEVER, SUCH TALK IS EXPECTED TO CEASE NOW THAT BETANCOURT APPEARS TO HAVE RECOVERED.

7. VENEZUELA ESTABLISHED DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS WITH THE BAHAMAS LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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AND GRENADA. ON APRIL 16, VENEZUELA FORMALLY ESTABLISHED DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS AT THE AMBASSADORIAL LEVEL WITH THE BAHAMAS AND GRENADA--THE LAST TWO ENGLISH-SPEAKING CARIBBEAN STATES WITH WHICH IT HAD NOT HERETOFORE HAD FORMAL RELATIONS. THIS MOVE IS IN KEEPING WITH VENEZUELA'S SELF-PROCLAIMED LEADERSHIP ROLE IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN. COMMENT: WE EXPECT LIMITED RESULTS FROM THESE MOVES--PARTICULARLY IN THE CASE OF THE BAHAMAS, A COUNTRY WHICH HAS VIRTUALLY NO TRADE NOR POLITICAL TIES TO VENEZUELA. ON THE OTHER HAND, GRENADA HAS RECENTLY BECOME A TOURIST MECCA FOR WEALTHY VENEZUELAN. FURTHER, ESTABLISHMENT OF DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS COULD CONCEIVABLY RAISE ERIC GAIRY'S EXPECTATIONS THAT VENEZUELA MAY BE PREPARED TO FURNISH AT LEAST SOME TOKEN ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE TO GRENADA.

8. NIEHOUS SUSPECTS APPEAR IN COURT. THREE SUSPECTS ARRESTED IN FEBRUARY FOR THEIR ROLES IN THE NIEHOUS KIDNAPPING CASE--CARLOS LANZ RODRIGUEZ, LUIS SOLORZANO, AND ANGEL CRISTOBAL COLMENARES--APPEARED BEFORE A MILITARY TRIBUNAL IN CARACAS APRIL 22 TO PRESENT STATEMENTS IN THEIR DEFENSE. ALTHOUGH THE DEFENDANTS WERE NOT PERMITTED TO SPEAK TO THE PRESS, A DEFENSE ATTORNEY MAINTAINED THAT NO EVIDENCE EXISTS TO SUPPORT A CHARGE OF KIDNAPPING", "MUCH LESS A CHARGE OF MILITARY REBELLION." LANZ, SOLORZANO AND COLMENARES WERE RETURNED TO PRISON AFTER THE HEARING.

9. OTHER REPORTING THIS WEEK INCLUDED THE MIDDLE EAST VISIT OF PRESIDENT PEREZ (CARACAS 3878, 3879 AND 4065),THE OPANAL MEETING IN CARACAS (CARACAS 3947), THE MEETING OF UN ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR LATIN AMERICA (ECLA) (CARACAS 3872), A VENEZUELAN REQUEST FOR HIGHLY ENRICHED URANIUM (CARACAS 3992), FURTHER REACTION OF VENEZUELAN LEADERS TO PRESIDENT CARTER'S OAS SPEECH (CARACAS

3940) AND THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE INTER-AMERICAN DEVELOPMENT
BANK.
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Message Attributes

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Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 4
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: 77 CARACAS 3789
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 21-Oct-2004 12:00:00 am
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 2729060
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: THIS WEEK IN VENEZUELA
TAGS: PORG, PDIP, PINT, SOCI, PARM, GJ, BF, VE, OPEC
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odb://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/a8811fa1-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
22 May 2009
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009